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Room S-407 on the Senate side of the Capitol has more than its share of protective electronic devices inside and armed guards outside. It is designed to keep its secrets.

On Wednesday, Jan. 9, during the Congressional Christmas recess, a small group of Senators was summoned back to Washington to meet in S-407, the most "secure" room in all of Congress, with high officials of the Central Intelligence Agency. The agenda: a presentation by the C.I.A. of its plans for covert, paramilitary operations in Afghanistan.

The Senators included Birch Bayh of Indiana, chairman of the Select Committee on Intelligence; Barry Goldwater of Arizona, vice chairman, and Joseph R. Biden Jr. of Delaware — plus the committee staff director, William G. Miller, and the minority staff director, Earl D. Eisenhower. The C.I.A. was represented by the Deputy Director of Central Intelligence, Frank C. Carlucci, accompanied by John McMahon, Deputy Director for Operations, the top man in clandestine operations.

What Mr. Carlucci spelled out at the session was a new covert aid program for the anti-Soviet Moslem guerrillas of Afghanistan. Since last November, as the Senators knew, the C.I.A. had been secretly providing the rebels with limited assistance — field hospitals and communications equipment. But after the Soviet invasion of Dec. 27, the Carter Administration had decided to escalate that aid program dramatically. The C.I.A. proposed to provide the Afghan rebels with Soviet-made AK-47 assault rifles from American stocks, TOW antitank weapons and SAM-7 surface-to-air missiles and launchers. (The SAM's were for use against an anticipated spring offensive when the weather would permit the Russians greater use of planes and helicopters; the offensive has since begun.)

The Senators listened. They offered no major objections. The next day, Mr. Carlucci advised the White House of the results of the session, and President Carter signed a Presidential Decision (known as a P.D.) setting the program in motion.

PUTTING BACK THE BITE IN THE C.I.A.

For all the secrecy and the high-stakes international gamble involved, that progression from Room S-407 to the signing of the P.D. was fairly routine. It was a standard example of Congressional oversight of American intelligence work as it has developed in the last five years — a balancing of the C.I.A.'s national-security requirements and the Congress's desire to keep a hand in foreign-policy decisions and safeguard Americans' individual rights. According to sources in both camps, the agency has been informing the appropriate Congressional committees of its plans, and the committees have, apparently with few exceptions, gone along.

Today, however, that relationship is undergoing dramatic change. The C.I.A. and other intelligence agencies are openly and successfully seeking greater independence of Congressional oversight and of a variety of other restraints, as well. According to its critics, the "unleashing" of the C.I.A. is well under way.

■ A bill that would deprive the Congressional intelligence committees of the right to review all C.I.A. covert operations has been approved by the House Foreign Affairs Committee. It is likely that some such legislation will be passed by Congress this year.

■ A measure, once encouraged by the Carter Administration, which would for the first time have defined the powers of the intelligence agencies, is given little chance in Congress this year.

■ A bill to amend the Freedom of Information Act to protect the agency's secrets is expected to pass the Senate. Further protection has been granted by a Supreme Court ruling.

doing the shouting. In the wake of the Vietnam War, Congress took a long, hard look at the freewheeling ways of the C.I.A. The first concrete result was the Hughes-Ryan Amendment to the Foreign Aid Authorization Act of 1974. According to this measure, no funds could be spent on a covert intelligence operation unless it was reported in a "timely fashion" to the appropriate committees in Congress. Public reports of secret, widespread and illegal C.I.A. moves against political dissenters in the United States (code-named Operation CHAOS) led to the hasty creation of the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations With Respect to Intelligence Activities, with Senator Frank Church of Idaho as chairman.

Along the way, the committee learned in detail of C.I.A. plans to assassinate Cuba's Fidel Castro and the Congo's Patrice Lumumba, and of the agency's crucial role in establishing a climate in which Chile's President Salvador Allende Gossens, a democratically elected Marxist, could in 1973 be overthrown by the Chilean military. The committee also discovered that the agency had been conducting mind-control experiments, feeding LSD and other drugs to unwitting subjects; covertly passing money to foreign political parties to affect the outcome of elections, and recruiting American journalists, clergymen and academics for secret intelligence work.

Congress demanded a curtailment of the C.I.A.'s ability, in effect, to make